

Blent.

Being an Epis. in the Story of
An Ancient House.

By Anthony Hope.

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Lady Adelaide, wife of Sir Robert Edgar of Blent Hall, died in Russia, probably in time for Lord Adelaide and Fitzherbert to marry and so make their son, Harry, the legitimate heir to Sir Robert's estates. The young lady, however, not the right heir. They kept the matter secret, and eventually Harry came into possession of all the lands and money with his mother at Blent Hall. Unknown to Lady Adelaide, a Madame Zabriskie and Mr. Zabriskie were also in possession of the secret, and Madame Zabriskie, her uncle comes to reside at Merriem Lodge, near Blent Hall.

CHAPTER III.

On Guard.

HARRY TRISTRAM was just on 23; to others and to himself, too, perhaps (if a man himself can attain any clear view).

Even the exterior of his youth had differed from the common run. Sent to school like other boys, he had come home from Harrow on Easter for the usual short holiday. He had never returned; he had not gone to the university; he had been a good deal, traveling and studying, but all ways in his mother's company. It was known that she was in bad health; it was assumed that either she was very exacting or he very devoted, since to separate him from her appeared impossible. Yet those who observed them together saw no impetuosity on her part and no excess of sentiment on his; friendliness based on a thorough sympathy of mind was his attitude in the presence of his mother. While Lady Tristram was to her son as she was to all the world at this time, a creature of feeling now half cold and of moods that reflected palely the intense impulses of her youth. But a few years over 40, she grew faded and faint in mind, it seemed, as well as in body, and was no longer a merry comrade to the boy who never left her. Yet he did not wish to leave her.

His childhood at least had been happy; Lady Tristram was then still the bewilderingly delightful companion who had got into so much trouble and made so many people eager to get in after her. Joy lasted with her as long as health did, and her health began to fail only when her son was about 15. Another thing happened about then, which formed the prelude to the most vivid scene in the boy's life. Lady Tristram was not happy; she was a religious woman, but happening to be in a mood that laid her open to the influence, she heard a sermon in London one day preached by a young man famous at the time, a great preacher of fashionable hearts. She drove straight from the church (it was a Friday morning) to Paddington and took the first train home. Harry was there—back from school for his holiday—and she found him in a smoking room weighing a fish which he had caught in the pool that the Blent forms above the river. There and then she fell on her knees on the floor and poured forth to him the story of that Odyssey of hers which had shocked London society, and its touching upon in Mr. Chuderton's journal. He listened amazed, embarrassed, puzzled up to a point, a boy's normal awkwardness was about to be pitched; he did not want to hear his mother call herself a wicked woman; and, anyhow, it was a long while ago, and he did not wish to be reminded of it. Another thing happened about then, which formed the prelude to the most vivid scene in the boy's life. Lady Tristram was not happy; she was a religious woman, but happening to be in a mood that laid her open to the influence, she heard a sermon in London one day preached by a young man famous at the time, a great preacher of fashionable hearts. She drove straight from the church (it was a Friday morning) to Paddington and took the first train home. Harry was there—back from school for his holiday—and she found him in a smoking room weighing a fish which he had caught in the pool that the Blent forms above the river. There and then she fell on her knees on the floor and poured forth to him the story of that Odyssey of hers which had shocked London society, and its touching upon in Mr. Chuderton's journal. He listened amazed, embarrassed, puzzled up to a point, a boy's normal awkwardness was about to be pitched; he did not want to hear his mother call herself a wicked woman; and, anyhow, it was a long while ago, and he did not wish to be reminded of it.

Later—and in a different sort of interview. The discussion was resumed a week later (Lady Tristram had spent the interval in bed) on a business footing. She found in her son the same carelessness of the world and its obligations that there was in herself, but found it with her fainter, more scorn and allied to a tenacity of purpose and a keenness of vision which she had never owned. Not a reproach escaped him; she observed that he was not going back to Harrow. She understood; she agreed to be watched; she abdicated her rule; she put everything in his hands and his.

Thus at 16 Harry Tristram took up his burden and seemed to take up his manhood. Too late, however, he was always assured that right and justice were on his side, that he was not merely justified in holding his place, but bound in duty to keep it. The consideration set no limit to his preparations against danger and their devices to avoid detection. He was not a man who would lie; where falsification was wanted, they falsified. No security relaxed his vigilance, but his vigilance became so harsh, so entered into him, that his mother ceased to notice it, and it became a second nature to himself. He was not a man who would lie; where falsification was wanted, they falsified. No security relaxed his vigilance, but his vigilance became so harsh, so entered into him, that his mother ceased to notice it, and it became a second nature to himself.

He sat silent a moment, seeming to consider some problem which her suggestion conjured up.

"No good waiting for that," was his conclusion. "Somehow, if I married and had children it would seem to make everything more settled. His preoccupation was on him again. "We could do with some more money, too," he added, and, as I say, I'm inclined to like the girl."

"What she like?"

"She'll be a fine girl—tall—well made."

"What'll be fat some day, I expect."

"Straight features, broadish face, dark, rather heavy brows—you know the sort of thing."

"O, Harry, I like all that." He was smiling meditatively, and jerked out what he had to say between the puffs. "I shouldn't like to mortgage Blent," he went on, a moment later.

"Mortgage Blent? What for?"

He raised a hand as if he had heard something. "But I should like to feel that I could at any moment lay my hand on a big lump of ready money—say £50,000 or even £100,000. I should like to be able to pull it out of my breeches pocket and say, 'Take that and hold your tongue!'"

He looked at her to see if she followed what was in his mind. "I think they'd take it," he ended. "I mean if things got as far as that, you know."

"You mean the Gainsboroughs?"

"Yes, O, anybody else would be cheaper than that. Fifty thousand would be better than a very doubtful case. But it would have to be done directly—before a word was heard about it. I should like to live with the check by me."

He spoke very simply, as another man might speak of being ready to meet an improvement rate or an application from a man who was likely to be a good precaution." He asked. Whether he meant the marriage, the check or the lady was really immaterial. It came to the same thing.

"It's all very troublesome," Lady Tristram complained. "It really spoils our lives, doesn't it, Harry? One always has to be worrying."

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The sun had sunk behind the tower and Lady Tristram sat in a low chair by the river, enjoying the cool of the evening.

Harry leaned his elbow on a great stone vase which stood on a pedestal and held a miniature wilderness of flowers.

"I touched at Fairholme," he was saying. "The paint's all wet still, of course, and the doors stick a bit, but I liked the family. He's genuine, she's homely, and Jane's a good girl. They were very civil."

"I suppose so."

"Not overwhelmed," he added, as though wishing to correct a wrong impression which yet might reasonably have arisen.

"It didn't mean that. I've met Mr. Iver and he wasn't at all overwhelmed. Mrs. Iver was out—when I called, and I was out—when she called." Lady

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